

THE DIALECTICAL IMAGINATION BY MARTIN JAY

I am reading *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950* by Martin Jay (1970). It's my introduction to the intellectual history of Critical Theory, which might provide a tool for understanding our society. I am encouraged in this view by one of the books on Amazon's list of suggestions for people who examined Jay's book. a book by Michael Walsh. The description of Walsh's book includes this:

In *The Devil's Pleasure Palace*, Michael Walsh describes how Critical Theory released a horde of demons into the American psyche. When everything could be questioned, nothing could be real, and the muscular, confident empiricism that had just won the war gave way, in less than a generation, to a central-European nihilism celebrated on college campuses across the United States.

How could I resist Jay's book with a recommendation like that?

The Frankfurt School is the name given a group of scholars who worked at The Institute For Social Research (Institut für Sozialforschung). The Institute was formed in Frankfurt, Germany in 1923 with a grant from a German industrialist, Hermann Weil, and his son Felix Weil. Many of the scholars were assimilated Jews, and as the Nazis began to emerge as a serious threat, the members made arrangements to leave. Within a month after Hitler took power, they were all gone, most to Columbia University and the New School where they remained until the Institute reopened in Frankfurt in 1951.

As a group, the scholars of the Frankfurt School

were dissatisfied with the explanations offered by the theories of the day to explain the explosive rise of capitalism, and the instability and other problems it created. They rejected to strict versions of Marxism. They were opposed to the fascists, the forms of socialism imposed in Soviet Russia, and to the forms of capitalism of their day. They did like the general approach of the dialectic, which stems from Hegel and on through Marx. They added a new tool, psychoanalysis, on the grounds that Marx and other theorists gave insufficient attention to the role of the individual in the processes of creation of society. Their field of research was primarily sociology and philosophy. They applied those ideas to a close study of the actual forms of society, including work lives, and cultural lives. Jay suggests that their goal was to find conditions that would lead a society to "rational institutions" and to find ways to bring about those conditions. The theory they developed came to be known as Critical Theory.

The name Critical Theory might suggest that the substance of the work of the Frankfurt School was a theory of society. It's not. It's a way of examining a society, or some specific part of a society, trying to understand it in context, and trying to understand it not just in terms of a fixed formal theory, but as the interplay of the various forces active in the society. Critical Theory is a tool, not an answer. Even so, the scholars of the Frankfurt School produced important contributions to our understanding of the forces at work in our lives. A notable example is the work of Adorno on authoritarianism. A clear explanation of a problem often suggests solutions.

The best-known scholars at the outset were Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Erich Fromm. Much of the later work was led by Jurgen Habermas. All of the scholars were steeped in the traditions of German intellectualism; they studied Kant, Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche among others. Much of their earliest work was devoted to analyzing these

earlier works and the problems they saw in light of the then current circumstances.

This book is an intellectual history of Critical Theory. The first chapter is devoted to the history of the Institute, brief biographies, including some of the early writings, of the leading scholars, and their flight from Germany. The author had access to a great deal of material, and was able to interview most of the surviving members in the late 1960s. The second chapter begins the intellectual history proper. It describes the fundamental early ideas of Critical Theory. I'm rereading that chapter now, but I want to start writing about the ideas I have already encountered.

A note on form. I intend to be quite careful in identifying the source of the materials as I write posts. Some of what seems important is Martin Jay's take on the ideas of the scholars, some will be quotes from those scholars, and some will be my effort to work out what I read and how it applies to our times. I note that the quotes from the scholars of the Institute are selected by Jay, and I do not have the original texts to provide context. That is a potential source of misunderstanding on my part, and should be kept in mind.

A note on my background in this area. I have only the barest understanding of Marxism, and know nothing about current Marxian writers. I have some familiarity with the philosophical terms I encounter, like phenomenology, epistemology, ontology and many more. I'll try to focus on the ideas about society, social change, and the role of theory in political practice, and stay away from hardcore philosophy.

I am reading this book because I firmly believe that the left requires a theory as well as a political practice. The left clearly has a preferred group of policies and specific ideas about preferred forms of society. Theory organizes our thinking so that we can have confidence that our preferred policies are part

of a coherent view of what society can and should be, and gives us a framework for explaining our views. That seems more important than ever now, when the party in power and its adherents are utterly incoherent.